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JOHN M. ROBINSON

United States Senator from Illinois. Judge of the Illinois State Supreme Court

FORGOTTEN STATESMEN OF ILLINOIS.

HON. JOHN M. ROBINSON.

BY DANIEL BERRY, M. D.

John McCracken Robinson, son of Jonathan and Jane (Black) Robinson, was born near Lexington, Ky., in 1794.

He was graduated from Transylvania University at a time when that institution was in the height of its renown.

He graduated with honors at about the age of nineteen years, choosing the profession of law.

When General Robinson was admitted to the bar, at the early age of twenty-two, he moved to Illinois.

He first landed at Shawneetown, and later moved to Carmi, which became his permanent home for the remaining twenty-five years of his life.

During that time, he became known as the most prominent statesman of Southern Illinois.

We must not forget that at this time, Southern Illinois was about all there was of the thriving youngster that was to grow into the husky giant it is now.

This young man soon became known for his high character as a brilliant, thorough-going young lawyer; and at once was appointed prosecuting attorney in 1819, and again in 1821; and States attorney in 1827.

Honors and large responsibilities were poured upon him.

In January, 1832, he was elected by the Legislature as United States Senator to fill the unexpired term of John McLean, over D. J. Baker, the choice of the Governor.

He entered on these high duties at the early age of thirty-seven.

In 1836, he was elected for a full term which expired in 1843.

He was in the Senate about eleven years and won a high rank as a statesman.

He was a Democrat in politics and had the special and personal friendship of both President Jackson and President Van Buren.

Senator Robinson not being a candidate for re-election upon his withdrawal from the Senate, President Van Buren appointed him Judge of the United States District Court for the Northern district of Illinois.

Two months later, on the 25th of April, 1843, General Robinson died at Ottawa, the seat of the court, after a brief illness.

Testimonials to his great worth and high standing as a lawyer, judge, statesman and citizen were given by the Legislature, the Bar and officers of the Supreme Court and various other bodies.

General Robinson was partial to military displays and rose to the grade of Major General of the State Militia, and was commonly known as General Robinson.

Physically, he was a man six feet, four inches in height, and built in proportion to that height.

His eyes were blue and his hair a rich auburn.

In personal appearance he could scarcely be excelled.

He was a man of dignified, courtly manners, who would draw the attention of all who met him.

He was kind-hearted, greatly beloved at home and among friends, and honored everywhere.

January 28th, 1829, General Robinson married Mary B. D. Ratcliff, daughter of James Ratcliff, an eminent citizen of Southern Illinois.

She survived her husband until 1864. He left two children, James M. and Margaret Robinson.

James married Miss Harrow. He was a splendid man. A successful and brilliant lawyer. He, too, died young, leaving a baby girl, now Mrs. Hawkins of Kentucky. Margaret married Robert Stuart. These are both dead. They left a daughter, Miss Mary Jane Stuart, now living in Carmi.

Just previous to his retirement from the Senate, General Robinson published the following letter to his constituents:

To the People of Illinois:

A year hence closes the second term of my service as United States Senator.

That you may be seasonably advised of my intention not again to be a candidate for re-election, I have thought it due, both to you and myself, to make it publicly known, in advance of the next August election, for members to our General Assembly, who will have the appointment of my successor.

Since taking my seat in the Senate, early in the first term of General Jackson's administration, an unusual number of measures of the most deep and exciting interest have been before Congress for consideration and action, the character and bearing of which are too fresh in the memory of all to require of me their recapitulation.

Upon the measures of the past and present administration, as well from a consciousness of your will as my own conviction of their wisdom and policy, my votes have mainly been in their favor.

On a very important subject, during the present session, my vote was given, not only against my own judgment, but, possibly, against the judgment and will of a majority of the voters of Illinois—it is scarcely necessary to say I mean upon the Independent Treasury Bill.

In giving the vote I did against this bill, it was done under the imperative instructions of a majority (not large, to be sure) of the members of each House of our State Legislature.

And if wrong, upon my instructions rest that wrong.

And whether these instructions were a true exposition of your will and wishes upon the subject was not for me, but is for you to determine.

My political tenets lead me to believe that the representative is bound by the will of his constituents; and that so far as relates to a Senator in Congress, the Legislature is presumed to be the true exponent of that will.

The official relation I bore to the authors of these instructions constrained me to infer that each member who voted for them did what he believed was the will and wish of his immediate constituents; and that it was his duty to give, and mine to obey them. For I would not allow myself to believe that any member of our Legislature would require of me to do that which he did not positively believe his constituents if speaking for themselves, would have required; nor which he, if in my place and similarly instructed, would not feel bound to obey.

Previous to these instructions, I had voted differently, and was anxious for the success of the bill; believing, as I then did, and yet do, its adoption to be demanded by the good of the country.

I shall proceed briefly and fairly, to state the great principles of this bill so much abused and repudiated by its opponents.

They are:

The establishment of a Treasury of the United States in fact, in which to keep the money of the people; and of secure places of deposit in the great commercial towns for the money collected and to be paid out at those places.

The appointment of public officers to take charge of these places of deposit and of the money placed within them, while the Treasurer of the United States is to have the charge of the Treasury and the money placed therein. The requirement of secure and sufficient bonds from all these officers for the faithful discharge of their duties and the safe keeping of the money entrusted to them.

A prohibition against their lending or using the money in their hands in any way or for any purpose other than in obedience to law; and making any such unauthorized use of any portion of the public money a felony, and criminally punishable.

Provision for the gradual collection of the public revenue in the legal currency of the United States, by which, at the expiration of four years, it will be all so collected; and similar provisions for making all the public payments in the same currency.

These are the great and all the great and essential principles of the Independent Treasury Bill.

And to carry it into operation, the appointment of but four new officers and some eight or ten clerks is proposed or required.

The simple and sole object is to make public officers, instead of banks, the fiscal agents of our Government.

And when the subject is freed from party feeling, prejudice, and the influence of the former mode of depositing the public money in banks, I can but believe that every reflecting, candid man, in view of the late and present condition of the banks, and with an eye to the future welfare of the country, will admit the measure, not only to be indispensably necessary, but the very best which could be adopted.

And so well am I convinced of the good policy of the measure, that I feel confident if once tried, its practical effects will prove so salutary and beneficial as to insure for it the approbation of all, and permanency as the settled and fixed law of our country.

Of the 35,941,902 acres of land in Illinois, there have been patented to soldiers as bounty land, 2,831,840 acres; granted for schools, canals, seat of Government, saltworks, with private claims and small Indian reservations included, 2,713,644 acres.

And of the balance of the year, 1831, when I first took my seat in the Senate, there had been sold but 1,838,601 acres,

since which, up to the 30th of September last, there have been sold 9,120,947 acres.

And land offices increased from six to ten.

The progress making to complete the surveys of all the lands within the State, warrants the belief that all which may not sooner, will in the course of this and the next year, be prepared to be brought into market.

Since the last of the year, 1830, the Indian title has been extinguished to about 2,119,680 acres, and the Indians removed beyond our bound, leaving no tribes claiming any portion of the public lands in the State, or residing within its limits.

Since the first of the year, 1831, the aggregate length of post routes in Illinois has been increased from 3,276 miles to 6,690 miles.

The transportation of the mail from 254,022 miles to 1,387,956 miles and the mode of transportation from 135,900 miles in coaches and stages, to 909,877 miles; from 118,122 miles, on horseback, to 326,503 miles; and 69,576 miles of steamboat transportation wholly added.

The number of post offices increased from 141 to 521.

The Cumberland road has not progressed as fast as, to me, its importance seemed so demand.

For the ninety miles in Illinois, there has been appropriated during the last nine years the sum of \$706,000.

Toward building a lighthouse and improving the harbor at Chicago, there has been appropriated between \$100,000 and \$200,000. And for the improvement of the navigation of the Ohio and Mississippi rivers, about half a million of dollars.

These are among the principal subjects immediately and directly affecting Illinois, upon which the General Government has acted thus far during my service as one of your Senators. And whether, or not, these measures have been beneficial to the State or aided in swelling the number of our population, in less than ten years, from one hundred and fifty thousand to over a half a million, you can readily judge.

For having been twice honored with an election to the high station, it has been your pleasure I should occupy, my heart is filled with gratitude, which it shall never cease to feel and cherish until it shall cease to beat.

Your fellow citizen and obedient servant,

JOHN M. ROBINSON.

Washington, March 3, 1840.